

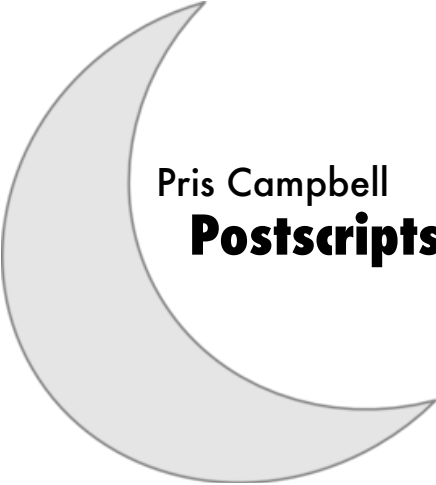
Postscripts to the Dead



Pris Campbell

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MiPO*esias* Chapbook Series 2012
www.mipoesias.com
GOSS 183
Bloomington, Illinois
Cover image by Didi Menendez

Published from Didi Menendez' laptop



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Acknowledgements

Some of these poems have previously appeared as is or in a slightly different form in *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *From East to West*, *MiPoesias*, *Blue Line Review*, *The Dead Mule*, *Remark Journal*, *Rusty Truck*, *the mini-chap*, *Paul Newman Blues*, *OCHRE*, *Verse Libre* and the *Vietnam War Veterans Poetry Archives*. The author wishes to thank the editors of these journals. Thanks also go Charlie Whitley, Joe Zerbolio and Scott Owens for their careful reading of the manuscript.

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Lost In Graceland

Elvis wanders through Graceland,
wonders why the rooms are roped off,
why strange women in Elvis tees,
scarves over their curlers, walk
through his house weeping.
He's tired of hearing Hound Dog
on the speakers, could care less
if he's anyone's Teddy Bear.

He wonders where Priscilla is,
why Lisa Marie looks right through him.
He doesn't get the supermarket jokes,
the bobbing Elvis dolls or why busloads
of strangers light candles outside every day.
He hears rumors he's dead but figures
the Colonel hid him, cooked that up for publicity.

Sometimes he takes a Caddy
out onto the Memphis streets,
shark fins cleaving a slipstream
gobbling the memories behind him.
He dreams of his sweet mama,
peanut butter and banana sandwiches,
quieter days in Tupelo.

Most of his sequins have fallen.
They leave a starry trail
to trace and retrace each night but
he trembles when a new one tumbles.
If they're gone before the Colonel returns,
how will he find his way?



Blue Eyes in my Dream

Paul Newman was dying
and he wanted to go to Mexico.
Gray formed like shingles over his face.
Hiding his eyes.
Hiding his lips.
Paul Newman grew weaker
so Joanne set up the trip.
My husband and me.
Her. Paul.
I wanted to seduce him
in a bathroom or maybe
a motel in Texas,
this man I'd had a crush on
since my teens,
wanted this last chance
to kiss him, to have him
kiss me, but the shingles
got thicker until Paul
was a house,
a house mostly roof.
I couldn't get in.
Joanne couldn't get in.
When the rain came,
Paul disappeared.
Mexico fell into the sea.
My heart turned to glass,
fell with it into the green ocean
spume, littered with shingles,
fed by tears, colored by want.



Hemingway's Ghost

Hemingway's ghost visits Key West,
cuddles his cats, stops by Sloppy Joe's.
Ten plump older men, bearded like him,
stand on the bar. A sign says
'look-alike night'. The crowds
scream, jam into the small room,
butts wriggling, breasts jiggling
to ear shattering music from the juke.
Gone are the lazy days when a paddle fan
rotated slowly over a cool brew.
Gone is the town he could stroll
leisurely through with no fear
of tourist trains and bikes ramming,
or men juggling balls, selling tees
at Mallory Square's fiery sunset rite.
He lowers his head in despair.
These bearded men have never run
with the bulls, hooked marlin,
bedded exotic women, yet
one of them will be him tonight



M.M.

Still sprawled on her bed of death,
Marilyn Monroe pens her memoirs.

A tell-all about Jack and Bobby
and what really happened the night that she died.
Old news, true, but she figures a lot of people
still want to know.

Nobody palms off the goddess of sex,
brother to brother, in that sick incestuous
sharing, without payback time finally arriving.

Too late, she realized they only wanted
the sex vamp, notches in their belts,
their face in her cleavage.
Not Norma Jean, hidden beneath the shell.

Jack grew horns whenever he came near,
groping her breasts, thrusting inside
too fast to please.

Oh, Mr. President, go slower.

But she'd already boarded that freight train,
the Kennedy men's favorite transport for their women.

A gypsy has promised to download the story to crystal,
blog it onto the Internet, tell the Post and the Times.

Maybe the hullabaloo will even outsell stories
about Charlie Sheen and Justin Beiber.



Maggie the Cat

She strong-armed death,
took it to the mat many times.
Maggie the Cat with nine lives,
friends used to call her.

This time the count got to ten.

She searches for Burton,
knows she has to find him
before that hussy he married
shows up.

Her heart is a tom tom.
Its beat radiates in every direction.
If he hears, he'll remember
when he once worshiped her—
his goddess, his violet-eyed Queen
of the Nile.

She'll steal him away to a hidden cloud,
cover them carefully with fog,
hold him close while she can
on one of those moveable,
unpredictable platelets of time.



Chats With Eleanor

Fairy Godmothers with ample laps
and June Cleaver faces slid down the rabbit hole
of old dial-up phones, ten cent colas, Betsy Wetsys,
and scratchy LPs an innocent lifetime ago.

Try strutting about nowadays in tiara and starched skirt,
waving a wand---the madhouse will open its jaws
and swallow you whole, but

my fairy godmother is clever.
She dresses like Eleanor Roosevelt,
talks like Eleanor., looks like Eleanor,
says she is Eleanor, back from the dead.

Each night she brings me hot chocolate, sits,
tell stories about quiet fireside chats,
her husband's withered legs and how much
she thought he loved her before Lucy.

She reminds me to floss every night
and to be sure to carry an umbrella
should sudden thunderstorms threaten.
She emphasizes that one must learn to
be brave in cold emptied beds
ever so much as on battlefields,
littered with the corpses of those
who once called our name.



Postscript to the Dead

I press my ear to the wind,
hear you walk between raindrops,
dance with the living dead.

I have refused to think about you
all these years until now;
settling into your den chair
hair still damp from the frost,
oblivious to that fist already seizing
your heart, choking life's passageway.

How I mourned you.

I am no longer the girl woman
who once scribbled love notes for your pocket,
wrote you bad poetry, told you my dreams,
the child woman who didn't know
your age carried you places
it would take me until now to discover.

I have grown older-
older than you during our time.

Will you sing me psalms, hymns
of praise, lullabies of love,
or will you hide behind a fallen leaf
until my curiosity wanes?

Know that I loved you as spring
loves the winter for reminding it to rejoice
in wild magnificent bloom while the sun
still flies high off the horizon.



Consolation

You've only known me
with my body slain and
curled deep into soft spaces
dreaming of billowing sails
bike rides, hair flying,
along dawn-pink ocean swells.
You've only seen me with my brain
in under-drive, thoughts short-circuited.
A turtle could outpace me now.
Soil from the grave dropping
to reveal your translucence,
you speak to me of days
we wished we would have had together,
days when our bodies were unbreakable,
minds yet unfettered by loss.
I reach out my hand to console air,
tell you we'll still have those days
when my ashes join yours in the wind.



Ghost Walk

Sometimes, when the sun
hurls itself over the horizon
and rain paints my yard green,
you walk through my den wall.

Your touch is a flutter of silk.
Shadows fill the holes in your head
eaten by cancer.

Sadness creeps, becomes armor
cloaking me.
It blocks out the dancing barbies.

In the kitchen my husband
steams turkey with rice.
Soon I will lift fork to mouth,
the clink chasing your ghost away.



He sings to me from the grave

The last day we spoke
no dark clouds appeared,
no novelist's foreshadowing--
the hero and heroine are in trouble!

I wrote him a love poem the day before.
Tore it up. My wording was too maudlin.

Told him that day I believed in fairy tales.
If he sent Cinderella's slipper I'd take it.

He would send a carriage instead, he said.
Not quite so breakable for precious cargo.

He called me that night to sing to me.
I slept, dreams rich with his voice.

He sings now for me to hold his hands,
bring him blankets, wrap his feet.

His voice was always so beautiful.

The flowers I've laid do nothing
to warm him



Flames

*He swallows one pill with a swig of scotch, sits.
Starts typing on an old Royal typewriter.
He takes a handful of pills, types again,
pulls a letter out of the Royal and sets it on the table.
Procol Harum sings on the radio.
He turns up the volume, takes the rest of the pills,
undresses, poses on the bed like Marilyn Monroe.
The camera closes in on a small brown gecko
watching from the bedroom wall.
Lights dim to gray, then black.*

I imagine his death this way.
Of course he could have done it in any order.
Undressed before typing.
Lain down before swallowing.

The police found him nude.
He left me books in his suicide note.
Gay, he was never able to exit the closet,
He drank too much, laughed when nothing
was really all that funny.
His way of smothering the flames.
His death as a movie:
my own flame stopper.
He was twenty-five.
Some geckos live longer.



Amnesia

I examine the shadow
that used to be us,
try to remember
days when you kissed me.
My lips are parched,
vagina sewn shut.
That part of my mind
has been excised,
a psychic lobotomy.

Have I died, a ghost
treading these rooms in parallel,
unseen, ignored?

The winds have come up.
They sound like the cry
of a thousand souls.
I think my dead mother cries with them

You rattle about in the kitchen.
Soon we will sit at the table
in silence, arms bent, dog begging.
Another day forgotten.
Another night yet to forget.



Black Widow

She undresses nightly to owl hoots
and wind chimes.

Perfumed and breathless,
she's ready for a new lover,
old ones drained and scattered--
dried leaves in her wake.

They've finally returned to tired wives
waiting, or empty apartments with beds
they can no longer bear to sleep in.
Her yard is littered with crumpled love poems.
It glows with spilt blood.

She spins silken tales for my own love,
weaves him closer with each word,
talons still hidden, demeanor meek
as a coward's shadow.

He's a dead man walking, but
nobody's told him yet.



The Haunting

He ghosted through my dreams monthly,
unnerving me at times with his regularity.

This boy, this loving boy with fire
in his hair I'd been sweet on
in high school, his death bell
knelling suddenly on the heels
of my late afternoon class.

I always thought he was alone
when he died, car smashed
into a tree on some back road at dusk.
I saw it that way in my mind
when mother called me.

I can tell you anything,
I'd written him, homesick already
my first month away at college.

His mother found the letter years later,
was going to give it to me,
but then she, too, was gone,
letter tossed into the trash
when her youngest cleaned out the attic.

An old classmate recently told me
he was in the car when
it rolled like a wounded animal,
spiking a killing rib into my friend's lung,

Death was drawing the curtain already
but he wasn't alone.
That classmate had held his hand.

Maybe that's why he haunted my dreams.
Maybe he wanted me to know.



Crap-Shoot

Daily, you stood in the crosshairs,
tossing the dice of salvation,
the one most likely to lose
in that crap-shoot with war.
Tour over, game won,
and drunk
in celebration,
you careened into a ditch,
losing your wife,
your love,
her life instead.



Cheek to Cheek

So abruptly, your name was ripped
from my dance card.
You zip open the sky,
slip through thunder,
tumble past rain to return.

Einstein applauds our cheek
to cheek from his time machine
in the corner.

Your fingertips fade as sunrise
begins to shroud.
Wildflowers grow from
your footprints.



Lilies And Headstones

Mother climbs from her grave nightly,
the moon sliding, bone white, along that
fragile passage from day's end to beginning.
She re-arranges plastic flowers, talks
to other coffin-freed friends, polishes
the naked cross guarding the faithful dead.

Lilies once bordered the shrubs
surrounding our house like a moat.
White ones. Yellow ones. Striated ones.
Soft scented sentinels poking their heads
up through the warm soil each Spring.
My mother's pride.

Fake carnations grace her headstone now.
Stiff, like the bodies lined in neat rows
beneath her; cold like her own body
which will never again climb into a warm bed
or scatter the crows that yet steal
from our abandoned cherry tree.

They suck the fruit cheerfully, despite
old clattering pans, and one rotten scarecrow
with eyes picked as empty as the spaces
where lilies once danced with the wind.



Winter Rain

It was small.
Perhaps the size of a pebble-
this dark spot pinning my father
to his bed like a magnet,
scrawling its obituary
across his helpless lungs.

My back muscles became a girdle,
holding me together.

A chiropractor offered alms
to the gods of death and dying,
loosened that corset of pain.

Grief poured like winter rain
into his warm hands.



Before

Before Big Mama died, before
she forgot her daughter's name-
my weeping cousin with eyes
dark as caves, before she forgot
her dearest Big Papa, forgot
how to dip her hands deep into
flour and lard to make her
pineapple upside-down pound cake,
before she forgot how kisses fierce
as a cyclone's roar used to feel
and before her glass angels
flew off with her best lamps,
sofa, four poster bed, and her Bible,
Big Mama had her vision.
Her seventeen year old grandson;
hair fallen out from chemo, leg
taken earlier by cancer, skin
thin as parchment on his dying bed,
tubes now draining his life more
than giving; her Michael, son
of my dark-eyed weeping cousin, rose
from his bed, walked to her house
in the night, whole again, and kissed her.
He kissed her then slid through a space
filled with yellow and gold sparkling lights
to kiss his dark-eyed weeping mother,
and they joined hands together in a circle,
the kind of circle that can never be broken.
Not even when bodies and minds fail.



Sirens

When my father was singing
his song of death and the day moon
dipped so close to our house
you could kiss it,
we visited our other house,
the one I grew up in.
Lost relatives danced
under the pecan tree and eyeless
Muff rose from her backyard grave
to rub cold bones against me.
Carl and Glenn hung upside-down
in the chinaberry tree and 'god
bless everyone but Harry'
again threatened to flip me head
over heels til my pigtails fell loose.

My heart fell to the ground.
I tripped over it.

A Chagall sky draped me, the
clock of time burning one hip.
My father's death rattle rode in
on the rising wind, warned me of worse
losses yet to come but, like Ulysses,
I blinded myself. Those lying
sirens would not fool me.



Explosion

You wear my tears
as a garland.
They glisten, stars now
in the solar system.
Your heart was too big.
It exploded, tossing you
to the bathroom floor.
Mother dressed us like twins
one summer. Her angels.
Do you remember?
Homeless for years, voices
taunting, you slept in dark
parks of rape or bartered
your body for a warm overnight.
You let it roll off--
that waterfall of mean times.
I search tonight for you in the sky,
dear cousin. The wind is plump
with your deep southern drawl.



My Father's Many Funerals

My father,
Superintendent turned gardener
in his retirement,
attended nearly every funeral
over his lifetime of losses in our
small southern town

'We must pay our respects,'
as bulletin in hand,
he sang farewell hymns
passed down from generations
of farewells chainlinked before us.

At age 83 he joined them,
the dry, warm seeds
for that spring's planting,
abandoned

Midweek...
A thumbnail of mourners,
I told myself.
No gathering suitable for
final respects he cradled
as diamonds in value.

The limo snailed up the steep hill
towards that tiny brick church
where my father
had taught Sunday School,
served as Elder,
taken communion,
bowed head in prayer.
Front pew
Same seat every Sunday.

Edging over the rise.
the limo offered first
steeple, spires.....car roofs.
Hundreds of car roofs.
A garden of color spilling
from parking lot into field.
Standing room only.

Respect, my father's winter harvest.
Our town's final gift.

Later, at my parents' home, I tucked
my father's seeds into pocket
to carry to my own home
for next season's planting.

The voices said...

...he was a minister from France,
unjustly deported, ass-kicked
from the city of lights
He believed them, followed
the same Parisian trail his mother
took in her pampered-rich youth
but this time they booted him for real
for trying to force his way
behind a French pulpit.

Sometimes the voices told him
to hit nonbelievers
unwashed pagans
anyone who disagreed
with his sidewalk rants.
They woke him in the night,
body still quivering from coffee
and cigarette overdose, to take
notes for his next sermon.
In our youth, before the voices came,
he beat me at ping pong every summer,
lean legs edging up Montreat hills afterwards
with his sister and me, our breath
leaving smoke signals in the cool air
for make-believe Indians to follow.
His grin could vanquish scary shadows.
Sunlight wove highlights into his pale hair.
The call came on a Sunday.
An explosion inside his head.
Limbs frozen.
Words sucked back into the black
hole of his stare before dying.

I wonder if the voices were silenced, too,
or if they tormented with unspeakable threats,
trapped him in unutterable horror.
I hope he found his way to Montreat again.
I hope he's become an eagle there, wings
lifting him over make-believe Indians
and abandoned ping pong balls.



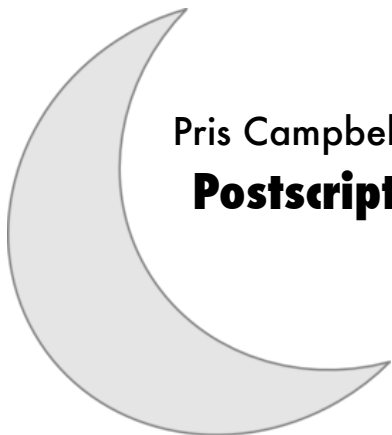
Undertow

I expected my father's death
to draw the sea to my feet,
the water threatening to bear me
away with it--not mother's.
Our voices were constant coils
of disagreement; my hair was too long.
I was too thin. My clothes were too tight.
My mish-mash of dishes would never do
if the relatives came down for Christmas.
I lived 'in sin' with a man, traveled with him,
tossed away my bra to her mortification.
After my knees buckled
and this illness pinned me to my bed of thorns,
the core of metal between us softened,
became a pillow to rest our heads upon, but
she slipped quietly into that undertow
and I was left alone on the beach, a girl again,
weeping.

About Pris Campbell

The poetry of Pris Campbell may be found in such journals as *Chiron Review*, *The Dead Mule*, *PoetsArtists*, *MiPOesias*, *OCHO*, *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *The Nervous Breakdown*, *Outlaw Poetry Review*, and *Wild Goose Review*. She also writes and publishes haiga and haiku and has been nominated three times for a Pushcart Prize plus multiple times for Best of the Net. She has six collections of free verse poetry. The most recent are **Paul Newman Blues** by Full of Crow press, **The Nature of Attraction**, with Scott Owens, by Main Street Rag, and **Sea Trails** by LummoX Press. **Sea Trails** is a compilation of poetry, log notes, chart fragments and photos from her six month trip down the East Coast in 1977 in a 22 foot sailboat. Formerly a Clinical Psychologist, she was sidelined by ME/CFS in 1990 and now makes her home in the greater West Palm Beach, Florida.

Visit her web site: www.poeticinspire.com



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